

THE  
SHAME  
MACHINE

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*Who Profits in the New Age of Humiliation*

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CATHY  
O'NEIL

WITH STEPHEN BAKER

 CROWN  
NEW YORK

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## CHAPTER 6

# HUMILIATION AND DEFIANCE

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On a sunny Memorial Day in 2020, a forty-year-old financial analyst named Amy Cooper took her cocker spaniel, Henry, for a walk in New York City’s Central Park. She unleashed the dog in a wild part of the park known as the Ramble. A nature preserve, the Ramble is popular among birders. And when one of them asked Amy Cooper to leash her dog, she refused. This sparked a racial incident that soon spread across the internet.

The birder was a fifty-seven-year-old man named Christian Cooper, no relation to the dog walker. He hardly fit the descriptive stereotype of a threatening man. He wore binoculars around his neck and carried a birding guide. He had a soft voice and emphasized the word “please” when asking Amy Cooper not to unleash Henry. Yet despite his gentle mien and establishment credentials, including a degree from Harvard and membership on the board of the New York City Audubon Society, Christian Cooper had one threatening trait: he was Black. Amy Cooper said she felt unsettled and called the police. The birder pulled his smartphone from his pocket and recorded as she falsely reported that an African American man had attacked her.

Later that day, Christian Cooper posted the video on Facebook, along with his recollection of the dialogue that took place before Amy Cooper called the police. In this description, he referred to her as a “Karen.”

The Karen meme, barely two years old at the time, refers to white women who exercise their privilege and power over Black people by appealing to higher authorities, whether a store manager or the cops. In 2018, a so-called Karen in Oakland, California, was recorded alerting police to what she believed was a Black family’s illegal charcoal barbecue in a park. She became known as “BBQ Becky.” In June 2020, in the liberal New Jersey suburb of

Montclair, a woman named Susan Schulz dialed 911 to report that her Black neighbors were building a patio without a permit. She became known as “Permit Karen.”

To be deemed a Karen, and to have your moment of white privilege blasted across the internet, is to undergo intense and widespread shaming. Within hours of Susan Schulz’s call to the police, dozens of neighbors and activists in Montclair were demonstrating outside her home, chanting and holding signs that read NOT HERE!, BLACK LIVES MATTER, and WHITE ENTITLEMENT IS VIOLENCE.

Amy Cooper, the Central Park dog walker, faced a much larger wave of shaming on TV and social media. She issued a contrite apology. But it was too late. The following day her employer, Franklin Templeton, fired her, effective immediately.<sup>[\*1]</sup> “We do not tolerate racism of any kind at Franklin Templeton,” the company tweeted. Association with a Karen, it seemed, could tarnish the reputation of an entire enterprise.

This is a new flavor of shame. Just a few years ago, a white woman reporting a supposedly threatening Black man to the police might not have experienced any pushback whatsoever. In fact, she might have gotten sympathy from the cops, and even appreciation for alerting them to a potential problem. Within her cohort, the suggestion that she was a racist might have seemed outlandish. That was her uncle, who dropped the N-word at Thanksgiving dinner, or the Minneapolis cop, Derek Chauvin, who clamped his knee on the neck of George Floyd and suffocated him—on the very same day as the Central Park bird-watching incident, as it happens. Those people were racists. But a person reporting a threatening man? In the past, that was seen as acceptable behavior.<sup>[\*2]</sup> Yet now, thanks to changing norms, that same behavior turns her into a monster, with shame leveled at her from around the world.

Networked shame engines stoke these conflicts and accelerate their spread. With today’s instantaneous communication, people have less time to catch up to the new standards and adjust their beliefs and behaviors. This produces intense unhappiness and social friction. As you might expect, shame fuels this discomfort. It’s the force pushing people to adapt to society’s expectations.

Historically, shifts like these have happened gradually. During much of the twentieth century, for example, it was common in many workplaces to make fun of gay people and to shun them. Homophobia was mainstream. However,

as more people came out, showing themselves to be sons and daughters and colleagues, more and more communities and industries started to frown upon open homophobia. It wasn't tolerated anymore. It was hateful. The norm changed. In many quarters, it was homophobia that became shameful, not homosexuality. This evolution extended throughout the economy, with industries like fashion and entertainment leading the way, and gradually spread to the mainstream.

For those who haven't adapted to new norms, these changes can be jarring. A natural response to a viral wave of shaming is anger and indignation. It is here that people enter the second stage of shame, denial.

One hallmark of this stage is cognitive dissonance. I'm not a bad person, Permit Karen might think. And yet people are outside my door raging at me. I'm not a racist, and yet my community insists that I am one. I must deny it.

Cognitive dissonance—holding two ideas that appear to contradict each other—can cause great emotional stress and lead to tortured logic. The term was minted in the 1950s by a social psychologist at the University of Minnesota, Leon Festinger, and two colleagues. They studied a cult that was convinced that a flood would drown humanity on December 21, 1954. The cult leader, a Chicagoan named Dorothy Martin, promised her followers that aliens would rescue them and zip them away in flying saucers before the waters rose too high. The aliens, of course, never arrived. Nor did the flood.

The psychologists found that fringe members of the cult had little trouble adjusting their convictions. They hadn't been deeply invested in the prophecy, and, yes, they'd been fools to buy into it. They avoided cognitive dissonance by letting go of beliefs that they saw were demonstrably false. Those who had assured friends and family that the end was at hand must have endured ridicule and shame.

The most committed cultists, however, took a different tack. They created a scenario in which their contradictory views could coexist. Yes, the flood had been coming, they insisted. And the aliens had been ready to whisk them away. But it was the steadfast action of their community, and the strength of its members' beliefs, that had saved humanity from a watery end. The cult didn't shrivel, as many had expected; instead, it grew.

A similar dilemma confronts people like the Karens, who view themselves as victims of fast-changing norms. Their choice is to adjust to the new order, adopting new terminology and behaviors, or, conversely, to question the

premise of the attack. A common course is to denigrate the shamers and reject their verdict, or even to create an alternate reality, one that feels better.

We'll see this time and again as we explore the fast-shifting beliefs and strictures of our time. The rules change. As the Karens can attest, vivid and shareable video of how people behave can reach a merciless jury of millions within an hour or two. This process is turbocharged by the social media platforms, which are the richest and most prodigious shame engines ever devised. The judgments they transmit trigger a host of reactions: pain, fury, denial, and often a frantic search for acceptance and community. And this gives birth to splinter groups and cults that reject mainstream views, choosing instead to piece together their own narratives and often conjuring up their own facts.

Despite their optimizing algorithms, however, the platforms need help to manufacture shame. That's where we come in. Hundreds of millions of us summon the requisite outrage and censure, often convincing ourselves that these microdoses of shame nudge the world toward justice and equality. After all, that's what shame is for, isn't it? The idea has always been to sting outliers, shepherding them back to shared values and acceptable behavior. A white woman calling a cop to settle a dispute with a Black neighbor is *not* OK, and she should be punished.

But think back to the Pueblo shame clowns. They were using comedy and shame to deliver lessons to members of their community, people they cared about and would check up on. Compare that to the vindictive social media posts denouncing Montclair's Susan Schulz, aka Permit Karen. One liberal Twitter user, MizFlagPin, states on her profile that "Together we stand for Truth, Justice, and the American Way." Yet responding to Schulz's videoed run-in with her neighbors, MizFlagPin tweeted that Schulz's case, on the basis of a single video, was effectively closed: "She's been identified. The neighbors she harassed are lawyers. Neighborhood youth protested outside her home. Neighbors sided with the lawyers. Stick a fork in her. She's done." It seemed like her objective was to banish Schulz from the community, not to help her adapt to new guidelines. For all I know, MizFlagPin and others denouncing Susan Schulz on social media may devote themselves to advancing the cause of racial justice. But much of the traffic around these incidents, it's safe to say, is performative. People are signaling virtue and shared values to their friends and followers, and building their personal brand, to gain more followers and to feel

righteous. This does little else but fuel relentless traffic and increase profits for social media platforms.

One consequence of this never-ending optimization of these shame networks is the rapid growth of the so-called cancel culture. Feeding on tweets, YouTube videos, and Instagram posts, it's like an enormous village council that judges people for their behavior, whether in words or actions. The Karens are prominent targets, or victims. And you can easily make a case that the attacks on them serve a social function. Perhaps at this very moment a white person is arguing with a Black neighbor. Recalling a much-publicized Karen scandal, he or she is resisting the temptation to call the cops. In that sense, mass shaming can prod society along a healthier path.

At the same time, torrents of networked shame raining down on an individual raise basic questions about crime and punishment. Does any woman deserve to bear a digital scarlet letter for the rest of her days simply because she acted foolishly one summer afternoon? Should she lose her job? These are key questions for fairness. But they're also central to strategy, because the shame weaponized in these online pile-ons can spark angry countermovements. Their excesses, often exaggerated, also provide a handy defense for powerful people under attack, who can then position themselves as victims of a hypersensitive elite. In early 2021, when numerous women accused New York's Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, of sexual harassment, he vowed that he would not resign, as that would be "bowing to cancel culture." And with that, he managed to avoid scrutiny, at least for some months. When a blistering report by New York's attorney general, Letitia James, made it clear that the charges were serious, far beyond any fabrications of cancel culture, Cuomo resigned, while still refusing to admit that he'd done wrong.

Conservatives in growing numbers, meanwhile, cite the most egregious cases, some real, others fictitious, to demonize the Left as a punishing horde of thought police, just a step or two away from the ruthless overseers of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. At the same time, they eagerly cancel people themselves. For example, they hounded San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick out of the National Football League after he spearheaded a peaceful movement in 2016 to protest police brutality against Black people.

Canceling people in the modern sense is akin to religious shunning: refusing to talk or even look at a former friend or neighbor who has left the

faith. It can come with the best of intentions—to banish racism from our society, to respect women, or to defend the rights of people to assert their gender identity. In many ways, though, the process can resemble a crowdsourced criminal investigation. Amateur sleuths sift through backlogs of social media postings—or they train software to do the job. And if they find evidence of bad behavior, whether in word or deed, they can raise armies of followers to target the offenders, eventually getting them fired or deposed, and stigmatizing them for a lifetime.

If you look at cancel culture from the perspective of Donna Hicks, it's bristling with dignity violations. It does not seek out dialogue and understanding, or provide a hearing for the accused. Instead it demands a groveling apology, which often brings the target precious little relief. Amplified by optimizing algorithms of the internet giants, this process enforces rules, often punishing people for a single misdeed and denying them due process. Hicks, by contrast, encourages people to give others the benefit of the doubt.

The other reason to check our shaming impulse is that virtuous tweetstorms often leave the underlying issues untouched. People who experience a twinge of guilt about moving from the city to a rich white suburb for its good schools might feel ennobled by sharing on Instagram a video of a Karen caught in the act, and packaging it with a biting put-down. While this may be satisfying, it sets too low a bar for anti-racist creds. It's much harder—but more necessary—to desegregate schools, open up zoning, and extend economic opportunities. Focusing on Karen episodes “lets white people off the hook,” wrote Christian Cooper, the Central Park bird-watcher in a *Washington Post* op-ed. “They can scream for her head while leaving their own prejudices unexamined.”

Giving in to online rage can also trigger what is now known as “white fragility.” In that state, white people feel so offended by the suggestion that they hold any responsibility for racism that they see themselves as aggrieved victims. Instead of confronting their shame, their cognitive dissonance forces them to repress potentially painful probes into racism and instead ask a simple question: Am I a good person? An affirmative answer provides a measure of emotional peace, but it's a fragile one, because of all those unanswered questions about race, and the doubts they stir.

We saw this play out in the anti-racism uprising in the summer of 2020. Largely peaceful protests erupted in much of the country, some of them



marred by vandalism performed by a tiny minority of those in attendance. Defenders of the police, including the president, focused on the violence, accused the protesters of terrorism and hate crimes, and called in the army to quell them. This was the government and its supporters in denial, the second stage of shame. They were basking in an alternative narrative, one that minimized both the destructive force of racism and their role in sustaining it.

It follows a pattern that has marked race relations in this country since the first enslaved Africans landed in 1619. Oppressors experience shame, some to a greater extent than others. So they find it much more comfortable to deny the human rights abuses they're benefiting from and to rally instead around myths. [3] In the nineteenth century, for example, the bogus science of phrenology—which correlated human abilities to the shape and contours of the skull—bolstered the agenda of white supremacists. Similar flimsy arguments masquerading as science shifted their focus, a century later, from the skull to the genome.

Many of those who still venerate the Confederate flag take refuge in false and self-flattering versions of history. If slavery was a crime against humanity, then the role the South played was morally depraved, and that's unfathomable. The Stars and Bars crowd has good reason to come up with prettier stories, in order to quell its cognitive dissonance.

Lots of the fiction made it into textbooks, indoctrinating entire generations with the mythology of the South's Lost Cause. Well into the 1970s, schoolbooks in many states not only avoided mention of the brutality of slavery but emphasized instead the supposedly loving relations on plantations. Writing in *The Washington Post*, Bennett Minton, a Virginian, revisited a textbook assigned to his seventh-grade class: *Virginia: History, Government, Geography*. One chapter, "How the Negroes Lived under Slavery," declared: "A feeling of strong affection existed between masters and slaves in a majority of Virginia homes."

The whitewashing continued: "Some of the Negro servants left the plantations because they heard President Lincoln was going to set them free. But most of the Negroes stayed on the plantations and went on with their work. Some of them risked their lives to protect the white people they loved." And Confederate icons were lauded: "General Lee was a handsome man with a

kind, strong face. He sat straight and firm in his saddle. Traveller [his horse] stepped proudly as if he knew that he carried a great general.”

That self-serving narrative has, happily, been challenged of late. As the nation turned its attention to racial injustice, activists tore down statues of Confederate icons. The once-sterling reputation of General Lee took a hit. A growing number of people no longer regarded him as the noble hero of a mythical Lost Cause, but as a traitor who waged war against the United States to keep millions enslaved. And the Confederate flag, long an emblem of regional pride, was increasingly seen as a rallying symbol of racial hatred, which had fueled a century and a half of injustice and unspeakable violence, including thousands of Ku Klux Klan lynchings. As norms changed, the Confederate flag assumed its place as an American cousin of the Nazi swastika. Even Mississippi removed its image from the state flag.

This new norm shames millions of Americans who read those textbooks and still cling to that false but comforting version of history. Most of them do not consider themselves racist, much less traitors to the United States.

They're firmly locked into anger and denial. It provides bottomless opportunity for race-baiting politicians, who appeal to shared grievances. Those new “woke” orthodoxies about race are misguided, they tell voters. *You're good. Your myths are true. It's the people shaming you who are bad.* This feeds the absurd contention, supremely consoling for many, that white people are the victims, not the perpetrators, of racism. Such an approach bypasses the necessary hard work, the much-needed reflection and dialogue on race, the reckoning. Instead it substitutes a simple and easy route to unalloyed hatred. The only chance for racial peace and progress on this front, says Eddie S. Glaude Jr., a professor of African American studies at Princeton, is “to convince white folks to...embrace a history that might set them free from being white.”

The range of white shame is extraordinarily broad. On one side, millions of whites have joined the protests against police brutality and racial injustice. They are facing facts and finding solidarity with citizens of all colors. They've moved past the denial stage of shame into acceptance, even transcendence. <sup>[\*4]</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, we have white nationalists burrowing ever deeper into their synthetic narrative, which wraps them in a cocoon of denial. Looking at it from their point of view, it might seem that much of the

country is turning against them as white men. During the months of Black Lives Matter marches in the summer of 2020, even the titans of the Dow 30, from airlines to pharmaceutical giants, rushed to produce TV spots denouncing systemic racism. Since then, though, the battle over a racial reckoning among white people continues, including a proposed law in Tennessee to make it illegal to talk about systemic racism in educational settings.

This mainstreaming of the issue has made it ever harder for the deniers to avoid. The process of abandoning cozy and well-worn stories is uncomfortable, and should be. It's how we as a society drag people, kicking and screaming, to the unwelcome truth. It's a tough transition. But why bother with it if you can escape, with a mouse click or a tap on the remote, into narratives absolving you of all shame?

I have a formative memory from junior high school, when I suppose I started thinking about the denial stage of white shame (although I certainly wouldn't have called it that at the time). My history teacher was describing Manifest Destiny, the driving vision of the nineteenth century, which held that white European Protestants would settle the entire continent, from Atlantic to Pacific, and exercise their dominion. By late in the twentieth century, my classmates and I could see that it was a naked land grab and justification for the genocide of Native Americans.

It was a creation story, but looking forward instead of back. It provided divine justification for killing fellow human beings for their property. It made white settlers feel better about themselves, washing away a great deal of the shame of raping and pillaging. But it didn't always work. People have consciences. Hollywood, according to the French philosopher René Girard, came up with a formula to absolve white settlers of genocide. For decades, he writes, movies framed the drama around survival: The Indian must die to save the whole (white) nation. In these cases, Girard writes, "scapegoating must remain unconscious, [so that] the operation of transferring sins from the community to the victim seemed to occur from beyond, without [the whites'] own real participation."

Like many others, I vacillated between feeling shame as a white beneficiary of these crimes and putting them at arm's length, halfway between paying attention and trying to tune it out. It was deeply troubling. And I found a

refuge for such feelings in mathematics. Math was just numbers; its ideas felt shame-free.

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White shame stirs anxiety, not least among liberals. Sometimes this can turn ugly, as happened not long ago on New York's Upper West Side. This is a privileged swath of Manhattan, stretching north from the arts cluster around Lincoln Center to Columbia University and Barnard College, a couple of blocks from where I used to live. People there pride themselves on their openness to diversity and equality. Many of them shudder at the idea of life in a more conservative part of the country, like Texas. They often associate the diverse millions in such places with racism and intolerance.

When the COVID-19 crisis exploded in New York, in March 2020, this neighborhood became a surprising laboratory of shame. The drama started when the mayor sent several hundred homeless men to a luxury hotel, the Lucerne. The idea was to keep them safe and socially distanced during the health crisis. The landmark building, erected in 1904, had recently undergone a multimillion-dollar renovation. It was conveniently located on prime real estate for the wealthy, between the Seventy-ninth Street subway stop on Broadway and Central Park.

For thousands of local residents, their new neighbors at the Lucerne were the wrong kind of people and, most emphatically, unwelcome. On a neighborhood Facebook group, some Upper West Siders fantasized about an armed movement to expel the newcomers, whom they referred to as "scum" and "thugs." They complained about the homeless defecating on the streets and insinuated that they were infecting the neighborhood with the virus. One man suggested "having round the clock militias shooting these assholes."

One woman posting on the group, a sixty-year-old, seemed to fit the bleeding-heart liberal stereotype of the Upper West Side. (To avoid shaming her by name, I'll call her Roberta.) She served on the board of Community in Crisis, a New Jersey-based nonprofit that fights the opioid epidemic and is dedicated to reducing the taboo around addiction. As she wrote in a Facebook fundraising post, her organization works to remove that stigma, to treat people with addictions simply as worthy human beings who are struggling with a serious medical issue, and to help them. Yet on the Upper West Side Facebook

page, where neighbors were discussing how to keep the homeless at bay, she wrote: “Forget pepper spray or mace. Use Hornet Spray and shoot at the eyes.”

Later, when contacted by a reporter for *Gothamist*, Roberta clarified that the spray should be used only in self-defense. She affirmed that she was “definitely of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” and that systemic racism was a real problem—but that the decision to move the homeless into her neighborhood was a mistake.

Now, let’s dig through the various flavors of shame produced by that single case. First, for Roberta, that phone call from *Gothamist* had to deliver a sudden and painful dose of it. After all, punishing the poor and downtrodden isn’t her style. Unlike most of us, she’s actively working to help people, in her case, those suffering with addiction.

What a nasty shock it must have been when she answered the phone one day and a reporter was asking her—for publication!—why she recommended shooting hornet spray into the eyes of poor, largely Black and Brown people. During a nightmarish pandemic, they’d had a solitary stroke of good fortune, moving from the streets and shelters into a safe and comfortable hotel. She not only wanted them gone. She also seemed prepared to hurt them, and urged her Facebook friends to follow her lead. It made her look like a cruel person, and a racist—uncomfortably close to a “Karen.” That’s why Roberta hastened to add that she was on board with Black Lives Matter.

She went on to detail the rationale behind the hornet spray suggestion. She was directing the advice to fellow Upper West Siders, only in the event that they were accosted by one of the homeless and had to protect themselves.

In her own account of her motivation, she claimed that her issue was not that these newcomers were poor and homeless, much less that they were one race or another. Instead it was their behavior, she argued, which was filthy and scary. They were the ones harassing people and fouling the sidewalks. So they were the guilty party. She and the others in her Facebook group were victims.

The problems she cited were real. Some of the newcomers had used the sidewalks as a toilet, and the inhabitants had not appreciated it. Yet these difficulties were caused, very likely, by just a handful of the people lodged at the hotel. They probably struggled with addiction or mental health and needed help, not hornet spray. Further, most of the other new guests at the hotel were simply living their lives, some of them working as janitors, couriers, or night guards for minimum wage, and grateful to come home to their own safe space.

But the angry Facebook group treated the entire cohort as a dirty, dangerous, and unwanted presence. In doing so, they shamed the homeless and punched down on them. <sup>[\*5]</sup>

The shame doesn't end there. By describing these residents and their Facebook page, and citing two or three of their nastiest comments, I'm participating in this drama, along with the reporter at *Gothamist*. We are exposing them as racists, or at the very least, people engaging in racist behavior. Being called a racist on the Upper West Side risks enduring stigma.

For that matter, you could say I'm punching down on Roberta, since here I am writing about her mistakes once again and publishing them for a global audience. She has already been shamed by name. By piling on here, in this book—a commercial venture—you could make the case that I am feeding and profiting from the shame machine. <sup>[\*6]</sup>

But I am doing so in hopes that we can all learn from it: As we make our way through life, most of us are likely to participate in shaming events, often without noticing. And if we're ever called to answer for the pain we deliver, we often react with bewilderment and experience cognitive dissonance. We think we're good, while the world informs us that we're not. My former neighbors on the Upper West Side could very well have believed that they were punching up at the mayor, while in fact they were punching down, some of them brutally, on the most unfortunate New Yorkers.

Much of this bafflement comes from wishful thinking. Following the massive 2020 protests against police brutality, for example, countless lawn signs sprouted in large American cities and their close suburbs. Most pledged allegiance to Black Lives Matter. Others listed a progressive catechism, avowing support for immigrants, science, feminism, the LGBTQ community, and so on.

Many of the people posting those signs no doubt felt that they had "passed" the racism test. They never used improper language. They voted for candidates committed to equality. Many went out into the streets and marched following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Given those post-racial credentials, it seemed safe to assume that they had overcome raw racism and moved past the performative victimhood of white fragility. Having acknowledged America's race problems, these progressive urbanites appeared to have reached the acceptance stage. And you could argue

that in going out to march, some had advanced further, into transcendence. They were taking on the structures that sustained racial inequality. Morally, they seemed to be on firm ground.

But most of the liberals who took to the streets do not have homeless people wandering around their neighborhood, some of them using it for a toilet. They haven't been tested like Roberta. Many of them also move to prime public school districts, or send their kids to private schools, because the city schools aren't so great, certainly not good enough for their families. They sit on zoning boards to prevent affordable housing developments from being established in their neighborhoods. Some, in the guise of defending educational quality, push to preserve de facto segregation of schools. Nonetheless, they view themselves as enlightened on race.

It's not just them, of course. It's all of us. We tend to go easy on ourselves, because confronting our weaknesses is hard work. Many of us mean well. And often that seems to suffice. Yet when the real tests come, we fall short of our own standards. If we look at our lives—each relationship, each encounter—through the lens of shame, we can begin to recognize offhand remarks and even jokes as conveyors of shame. Each one of us is engaged with it, receiving and dishing it out in many different forms. Once we open our eyes to it, it's everywhere. It's making a tart comment to the intern, or instructing the grandfather, with thinly veiled contempt, how to work the TV remote. It's telling the twelve-year-old to stop eating so much dessert. It's retweeting a snarky review. The shame is not always bad or uncalled for, but it's crucial to be aware of it, especially when it happens on the lightning-fast shame networks.

In each dimension of shame, whether the issue is obesity, poverty, addiction, racism, or the struggle to achieve, each of us faces choices. Many take a stand in one area, really working at it, while utterly relaxing in another. In a single afternoon, someone might bravely face down club-wielding policemen in a march for racial justice and then take a break to send out a flurry of poisonous punching-down tweets. When it comes to shame, we can be simultaneously gentle and merciless, fighting against one stigma while defending another.

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It sounds simple when you say it: Be nice. Don't spread poison. Give people the benefit of the doubt. The trouble is that we humans are prone to fooling

ourselves, at times underestimating our own agency, or seeing ourselves as victims, when we're really not.

Bret Stephens, a conservative columnist for *The New York Times*, provides a pungent example of such delusion. Stephens enjoys clout that other writers and political thinkers only dream of. He can write about anything he wants on prime media real estate—the op-ed page of the world's most influential newspaper. If he levels his editorial guns at someone, they feel it.

In April 2019, it was reported that *The New York Times*, in its fifty-two-story Renzo Piano–designed headquarters in Midtown Manhattan, was struggling with a bedbug infestation. This led David Karpf, a professor of media and public affairs at George Washington University, to post on Twitter what he later called “a milquetoast joke”: “The bedbugs are a metaphor. The bedbugs are Bret Stephens.”

In the media balance of power, the professor had launched a solitary attack on an imposing mainstream battleship with the internet equivalent of a peashooter. Karpf's tweets reached only a handful of Twitter followers, and his joke about bedbugs, like most tweets, went largely unliked, unnoticed, unretweeted. It seemed consigned to oblivion.

But someone showed it to Stephens, and it struck a nerve. The columnist felt victimized. It didn't matter to him that the joke reached almost no one. Stephens went on the attack. He promptly emailed Karpf and he made sure to copy the provost of Karpf's university. This was a warning shot, raising the possibility that the professor's job might be at stake. In the email, Stephens accused Karpf of a gross insult and incivility. He dared him to come to his home, where he could call the columnist a bedbug in front of Stephens's wife and children. From his heights, the columnist was shaming the professor for making a joke about him. On MSNBC, Stephens called Karpf's tweet “dehumanizing and totally unacceptable.” That is to say that one obscure tweet by a little-known professor had the awesome capacity to whittle away at the columnist's humanity. This was delusion on a grand scale.<sup>[\*Z]</sup>

Several days later, Stephens detailed his pain in a column reaching millions of readers. Without naming Karpf or mentioning the tweet, he tied it into a World War II narrative featuring a once-civil society falling into hatred, violence, authoritarianism, and, ultimately, genocide. “The political mind-set” of the Nazis, Stephens wrote, “that turned human beings into categories,



classes and races also turned them into rodents, insects and garbage.” Karpf’s tweet, though small, was an example of a poisonous trend, one that could lead our country to disaster.

Stephens, to be fair, made some good points. It is true, as we’ve seen, that social media empowers online posses that can victimize innocent people, shame them, and fuel hatred and animosity. Stephens, however, was positioning himself not only as a defender of other people’s liberty but also as a victim. Ignoring his own power and privilege, he convinced himself that he was punching up at the forces of intolerance, when in fact he was punching down on a professor. As Karpf later wrote, “He really needs to learn not to abuse his status to threaten random Twitter users.”

What’s more, Stephens misunderstood the dynamics of the platforms, including the exponential magic of online transmission. When Karpf received Stephens’s email, he promptly tweeted about it. As he described in his own op-ed:

Something clicked, and the story went immediately viral. The original joke had zero retweets and nine likes. It now has 4,700 retweets and 31,200 likes. I have spent the past two days in the center of the viral media controversy, instead of observing with interest from the sidelines.

Stephens had equipped the peashooter with his own media battleship. He had tried to shame the professor, and the shame instead came raining down on him. Karpf would go on to teach the encounter in his media classes, he wrote, as a case study of the so-called Streisand Effect:<sup>[\*8]</sup> when authority figures attempt to repress online content but instead their actions draw massive attention to it. This happens with predictable frequency. Those on top protect their own interests, and shame their antagonists, under the guise of defending the greater good.

In July 2020, as protests against police abuses crested around the world and the novel coronavirus swept the globe, a group of 151 authors, artists, and intellectuals put together what they saw as a written defense of free speech. They published it in *Harper’s Magazine*, the 170-year-old standard of liberalism. “The democratic inclusion we want can be achieved only if we

speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides,” they wrote. They cited “a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.” Editors, they lamented, were fired for running controversial pieces. Academics were investigated for quoting certain works of literature in class. This who’s who of arts and letters was defending unencumbered speech, even if what’s being said is painful or untrue. Those issues, they argued, should be litigated in the free flow of public debate, not by prohibition, punishment, or decree.

Like Bret Stephens, they made some good points. But like him, they ignored both the power dynamic at play and the direction of their punching. These were some of the most privileged players in the industries of words—journalism, books, theater, and television. Like Stephens, they had enviable platforms. And like him they claimed they were launching their campaign in defense of the broader public.

Their own interests, though, were front and center. They were thought leaders who could publish broadly and promote their brands on TV shows, podcasts, and radio interviews. The voices rising against them, exposing their foibles or prejudices, were becoming a huge inconvenience. They had to be dealt with.

Take J. K. Rowling, one of the signers. A year earlier she had gotten into an ugly row over gender, specifically her quibbles about accepting trans women as women. These are indeed issues people need to talk about. Yet this one, unfortunately, played out on Twitter, and a disproportionate share of humanity’s attention was focused on the theories of one woman about a subject that had nothing to do with the source of her fame, Harry Potter. A blizzard of angry and shaming tweets came her way (many of them, doubtless, from people posturing for their friends and followers).

I hated the whole drama. Wouldn’t the world be a happier place, I thought, if we didn’t have to know what J. K. Rowling thinks about trans women? But Rowling had unveiled her opinion in this digital public square. And now she felt persecuted, victimized. She surely welcomed the chance to sign the Harper’s Letter. Get those furious and judgmental people out of my face (and my Twitter feed)!

Her critics looked at it from a different perspective, however: Rowling and her fellow highfliers were shaming them. The letter accused the indignant masses of not just intolerance but shallow thinking, and dividing a complex

world into simple dichotomies of good and bad. It accused them of bullying and creating prime conditions for the rise of dangerous demagogues. It was hardly a flattering assessment. In fact, the literary establishment was punching down, and hard.

From the victims' perspective, Rowling had built one of the most massive literary franchises in the history of the planet. Her Harry Potter books and movies and paraphernalia had turned her into that rarest of combinations, a billionaire author. She had what every writer hopes for, an audience ravenous for her words. So when she decided to feature her discomforts surrounding gender on an open forum, were transgender people and their supporters supposed to accept her judgment quietly? Why wouldn't they respond?

The authors attempted, in vain, to position the Harper's Letter as a full-throated defense of the disenfranchised. They argued that "the restriction of debate...invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation."

But despite this rhetorical flourish, the letter took a stance against the small fry, not on their behalf. The message, after all, was that too many of the presumed powerless were speaking up with their allegedly reductive and censorious online voices. More than a thousand of them took time to comment on *The New York Times's* coverage of the issue. One, signed DMP from Pennsylvania, asked:

So let me get this straight:

A bunch of rich folks advocating free speech are now offended that others are using their FREE SPEECH to call them out?

So who's trying to silence who?

The authors' self-interest, camouflaged in much of the letter, shines through toward the end, where they demand shelter from any storms of shame that their words might provoke. "As writers," they explain, "we need a culture that leaves us room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes."

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Yes, we should all be free to make mistakes. Alabama's George Wallace made his share of them. As he climbed to power, he was downright cruel. At his

inauguration as governor of Alabama in 1963, the same year that Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, Wallace took the opposite approach:

In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw a line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say, segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever.

Racism was Wallace’s *métier*. It fueled his rise to power, both in Alabama and in his national campaigns for the presidency. In the 1968 presidential election, Wallace won five states in the Deep South, even though the presidency ultimately went to Richard Nixon. (No third-party candidate since has garnered a single state.) Wallace dared to say out loud the vicious things that many of his fellow white citizens were thinking. That was his connection.

During this time, shame didn’t seem to be an issue for George Wallace, at least as far as the public could see. Maybe he believed what he said, that segregationist policies were ordained by God and necessary for the defense and well-being of “his people.” Or maybe racism was just useful politically.

In either case, something dramatic happened in the spring of 1972. Wallace was in Maryland, campaigning for the Democratic nomination for president, when a would-be assassin named Arthur Bremer shot him. Bremer had initially planned to kill President Nixon, but he decided Wallace would be a much easier target. Bremer shot Wallace four times at point-blank range but failed to kill him. One of the bullets lodged in the governor’s spine, paralyzing him from the waist down.

While Wallace was recuperating in the hospital, he had an unexpected visitor: Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman ever elected to Congress, and also the first to run in a presidential primary. Chisholm had suspended her campaign after the assassination attempt. And over the objections of her staff, she went to see him.

Focusing on the political calculation, Wallace asked Chisholm how her people would respond to her unusual visit. “I know what they’re going to say but I wouldn’t want what happened to you to happen to anyone,” Chisholm said, according to Wallace’s daughter, who adds: “Daddy was overwhelmed by her truth, and her willingness to face the potential negative consequences of

her political career because of him—something he had never done for anyone else.”

Perhaps Wallace felt a smidgen of shame. Maybe his brush with death led him to rethink his priorities for his remaining time on earth. In any case, he underwent a moral metamorphosis. On a Sunday in 1979, Wallace appeared, unannounced, at the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The church was central to the civil rights movement, and four years earlier had been named a National Historic Landmark for its role in American history.

Except for the attendant who rolled his wheelchair to the front of this sanctuary, Wallace was unaccompanied. “I’ve learned what suffering means in a way that was impossible,” he told the congregation. “I think I can understand something of the pain that black people have come to endure. I know I contributed to that pain and I can only ask for your forgiveness.”

Two years later, Wallace ran for governor again, this time on a racial unity platform. He won, receiving 90 percent of the African American vote. Seeing that number, you might suspect that it was political calculation on his part to apologize. But that’s not unusual or, for that matter, problematic. When we decide to face our shame, whether drug addiction or marital cheating, we always analyze the costs and benefits. What do I have to gain from this? What might I lose? While it’s true that being honest and confronting an issue has an immense and often transformative payoff, it can also hurt. Most people will choose to avoid the pain and the reward, but both fit into the equation.

Regardless of his motivation, Wallace made the right choice. He made himself vulnerable to the judgment of his victims. That meant a lot to them. It was a courageous step, one we could all learn from: *I have done wrong. I’m sorry. I ask for your forgiveness.*

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[SKIP NOTES](#)

[\\*1](#) As of this writing, she is suing her former employer on the grounds that they discriminated against her on the basis of her race and gender.

[\\*2](#) Recall, if you will the 2014 app SketchFactor that positively encouraged such reporting.

[\\*3](#) This starts, of course, with racist ideas themselves. See Ibram X. Kendi’s *Stamped from the Beginning* for a historical treatment.

\*4 At least for police violence. We are still waiting on zoning laws and schools.

\*5 I should add here that an opposing contingent, the Upper West Side Homeless Advocacy Group, organized to defend the homeless population and resist the city's push to move them to a Radisson in the Financial District, where there were fewer busybody neighbors to upset. It was a two-way tussle.

\*6 For that matter, when companies fire their workers for mistakes they made that went viral on social media, that's also punching down, often in the guise of punching up.

\*7 It's also reasonable to point out that, as a woman who writes for a living, I had to get a thicker skin than Stephens apparently has, and early on. And I'm white. My friends who are women of color routinely get mobbed with harassing and truly demeaning tweets and comments. So it's all relative, but some people learn about needing thick skin early on.

\*8 The singer Barbra Streisand gave birth to this effect, unwittingly, when she sued a photographer in 2003 for distributing aerial photos of her mansion in Malibu, California. When she filed the suit, the online photo had been accessed six times, including twice by Streisand's lawyers. Her suit turned it into a digital sensation.

## Chapter 6: Humiliation and Defiance

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